

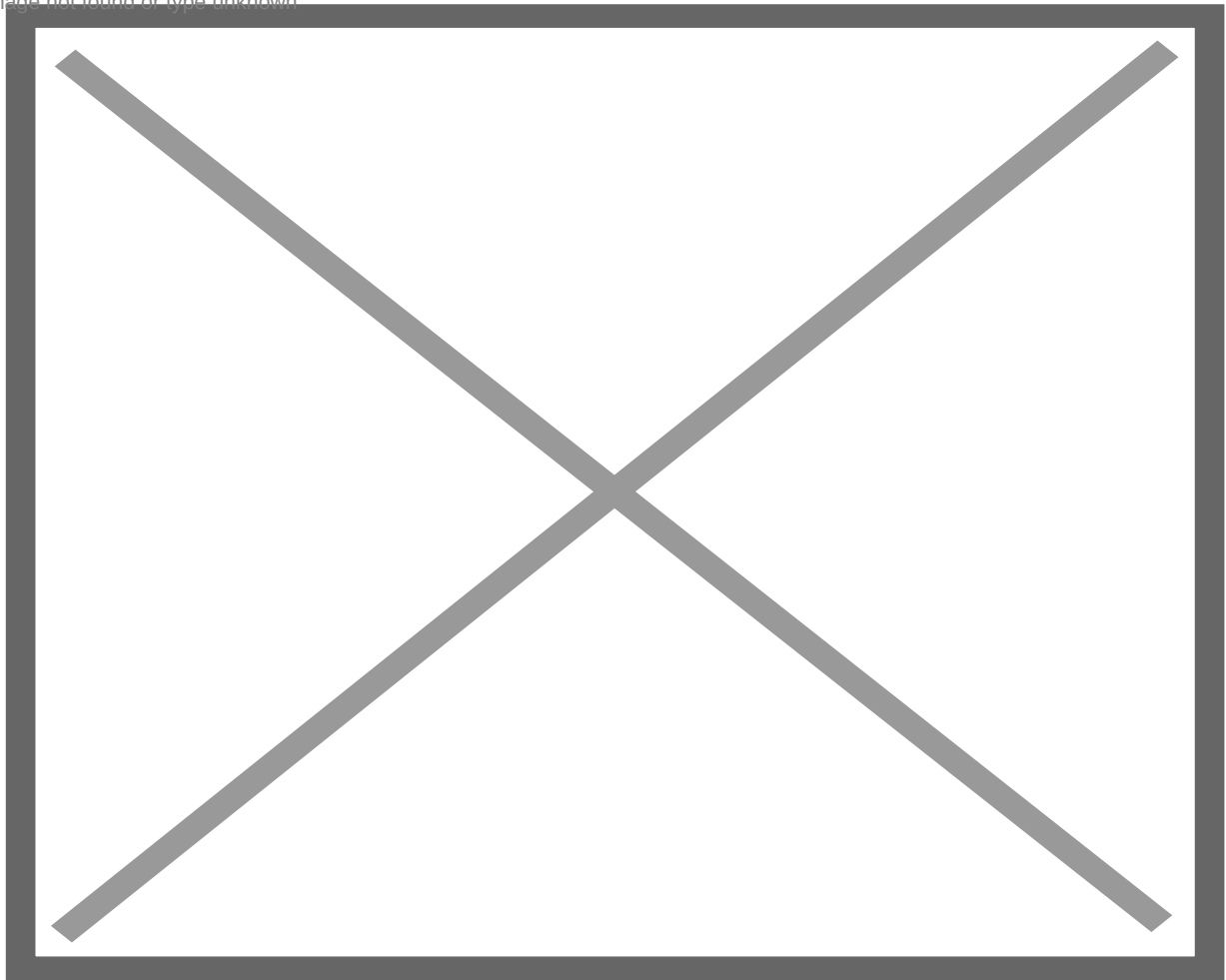
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VITEMA Still Struggling to Fix Broken Tsunami Warning Sirens Rendered Inoperable After 2017 Hurricanes

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Certain emergency warning systems in the U.S. Virgin Islands are still in a state of disrepair more than 5 years after hurricanes Irma and Maria swept through the territory, members of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, and Public Safety heard yesterday from V.I. Territorial Emergency Management Agency Director Daryl Jaschen.

Mr. Jaschen disclosed that as VITEMA prepares for its next tsunami drill in March, it is grappling with having only a limited coverage area where tsunami alerts can be heard. There are “tremendous issues” with the 44 sirens placed across the territory, installed in 2015.

“We have completed the recovery project and the assessments of all 44 sirens falling from hurricanes Irma and Maria. We’re now going through a monthly test of those [sirens] every third Thursday of every month and looking for support, for feedback on them,” he told senators. He said none of the sirens worked after the hurricanes, with components needing to be replaced or repaired. “It’s the same siren heads they had before, the same technology. As far as if they work or not, that’s why we’ve started to test them every month on the third Thursday,” Mr. Jaschen shared.

As it stands, some of these sirens are “not sounding,” like the one on Water Island, which has been tested three times. In that case, other sirens, according to the VITEMA director, have faults caused by “lightning strikes”. The nonfunctional sirens on St. Croix, Mr. Jaschen explained, are affected by a system-wide “repeater issue” on the west end of that island. In these cases, VITEMA is able to work on solutions. For St. Croix, “we’ve been working for six months trying to get the poles up,” Mr. Jaschen said to senators during Tuesday’s committee meeting, anticipating that the work would be complete sometime next week. The agency is working with a vendor to repair the broken siren on Water Island as well.

But other nonfunctional sirens remain a mystery to VITEMA. “We have a tremendous challenge right now understanding the complexities around the tsunami sirens,” Mr. Jaschen noted.

The next territory-wide tsunami preparedness drill, Caribe Wave, is scheduled for Thursday March 17. All 44 sirens will be activated, and over 165 people will be voluntarily evacuated to a safe elevation, 80 feet above sea level. During the drill, members of the public are encouraged to familiarize themselves with the warning tone, where they can hear it, and to report areas where the sirens cannot be heard. These tests began in January and will continue until VITEMA collects enough public feedback to determine the functionality of each siren.

Given the current circumstances, Mr. Jaschen told senators that it is even more important now to have additional methods of warning the public about emergencies, including the use of bullhorns and the Alert VI System.

Residents also need to be aware of the signs of an impending tsunami following a triggering earthquake, such as receding sea levels, he said, so they don’t need to wait on warning systems to know to head to higher ground.